

New Horizon High students, officials part of at-risk teen TV special Tuesday

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Published: March 25, 2013 at 11:08 p.m. PDT— Updated: March 25, 2013 at 11:08 p.m. PDT
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Students from New Horizons High School as well as Mid-Columbia educators and juvenile justice officials will be in the national spotlight tonight during a public TV special about at-risk teens.

Public TV talk show host Tavis Smiley visited the Pasco alternative school in late October and listened to a panel of students, who are teen parents, talk about their education. There were also interviews with Principal Christy Rasmussen, juvenile justice advocate Jacqueline Van Wormer and Benton-Franklin Superior Court Commissioner Jacqueline Stam.

A news release from Smiley about the segment said his reporting showed a lot of problems with how disruptive teens are handled, creating a "school-to-prison pipeline."

Leslee Caul, spokeswoman for the Pasco School District, said Smiley's visit is more indicative of the flexibility and inventiveness being used to get students through their education.

"They're doing really great stuff at New Horizons," Caul told the Herald. "They're offering a full menu of choices for kids who need help getting to graduation."

Tonight's segment, Education Under Arrest, is the sixth installment in Tavis Smiley Reports, a series of primetime specials.

Smiley also visited Louisiana, California and Missouri to look at the juvenile justice system, specifically "no-tolerance" policies and the prevalence of high school dropouts.

"The report card is not good. One in every three teens who is arrested, is arrested in school -- which literally arrests their progress for a promising education," Smiley said in the release.

But Seth Johnson, a head teacher at New Horizons, said Smiley was given a tour of the school of about 200 students when he visited and heard about the school's approaches to retaining and educating struggling students, from dropout prevention programs to support for teen parents.

"I think he was fairly impressed," Johnson said.

Stam said she talked to Smiley about the truancy cases she's overseen for the past five years. In that time, juvenile justice staff have moved away from sending repeat offenders to juvenile detention and have sought to diagnose reasons kids skip school. Then they try to connect them to tutoring or others to help with goal-setting and determining a path for the future.

An interview with Van Wormer, a coordinator with the juvenile justice reform advocacy group Models for Change, is part of a group of videos released ahead of tonight's broadcast online. She is shown talking to Smiley on the New Horizons campus near Columbia Basin College, discussing how detention doesn't correct bad behavior and how early intervention is crucial.

Caul said intervention is what New Horizons is about and that it has been recognized for its efforts, including being designated as a School of Innovation by state education officials last year.

"The fact that (Smiley) was interested in visiting speaks to that," she said.

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